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**Editorial | Island Voices**

# Civic engagement begins early

By Michael F. Broderick

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As Hawaii's state Legislature convenes its annual session today, our community will take great interest in the various discussions, debates and decisions of our lawmakers. Some of those watching may not yet even be able to vote.

Hawaii has one of the nation's lowest voter participation rates — only about 55 percent of registered voters voted in this past November presidential election. Hawaii voters also tend to skew older, with typically the largest percentage participation rate from residents between ages 65 and 74, as they come to understand what is at stake and to help to define the type of society in which they live. But participating in our democracy from a young age can impact lives, and our greater community.

As the Honolulu Star-Advertiser reported ("Youth legislature to take up mock measures," Dec. 29), just before the new year a group of 76 middle- and high-school student delegates introduced and debated bills as part of the YMCA of Honolulu's 66th annual Youth and Government mock legislature.

Several of the proposed bills identified ended up passing the mock session, and will be presented by the youth to Gov. David Ige. Those bills include automatically registering residents to vote when they apply or renew a driver's license; requiring SNAP benefits, formerly known as food stamps, to be accepted at farmers markets; and permitting homeless people to obtain state identification cards free.

Past YMCA of Honolulu Youth and Government graduates are Hawaii's two U.S. senators, Brian Schatz and Mazie Hirono, and also include retired U.S. Army Gen. Eric Shinseki and many other community leaders.

But the Y program also boasts graduates like “Mari” from Waianae, who completed the YMCA school-based substance abuse treatment program and made the decision to turn her life around. Mari this year found a voice for her passion for writing as a member of the Youth Press Corp at the mock legislature covering the progress of bills in the session.

Youth Sen. Case McKinley, a senior at Waialua High School and three-year Youth and Government participant, right before the mock session started received his acceptance letter for college into the Harvard College class of 2021.

In his keynote address at the opening session, McKinley said that Youth and Government taught him “to listen in order to understand and then speak in order to be understood.”

The lessons of civic engagement and civility can occur at any age, but the younger the better. Civic engagement means getting involved in your community, and not only politically. Nothing great, nothing significant ever happens by standing on the sidelines. Our youth delegates have learned that they have to get in the game.

They also learned to do their work with civility, to be patient, humble and exercise mutual respect in conversations, especially with those with whom they may disagree. These leaders sometimes lead, and sometimes follow, and they allow themselves to be persuaded.

The youth presenting their bills to the governor may not see their mock legislation become law, but they will learn how to advocate while still being civil and respectful, which are lessons for any and all ages.

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